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HARVARD COLLEGE · CLASS OF 1877

JOSIAH BYRAM MILLET

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JOSIAH BYRAM MILLET

Born at East Bridgewater, Massachusetts, September 28, 1853.

Died at Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 27, 1938.

MILLET was fitted for College at Phillips Exeter Academy and intended to enter Harvard a year or two earlier, but was delayed by an injury received in the gymnasium at Exeter. In College he roomed in Grays all four years. The social side of college life appealed strongly to him. He formed many firm friendships in the Class, took a prominent part in theatricals, and was devoted to music. Especially his playing on the guitar was a delight to the listener.

As early as 1870 he looked forward to becoming a journalist and during the whole college course wrote for Boston newspapers, thereby helping to pay his expenses. In our Third Report (1885) he says: "In my Freshman year several advantages for newspaper work appeared and I found it convenient to make connections with the *Advertiser* and the *Sunday Courier*, which I retained while I was in College." Naturally he was interested in college journalism and, though not on the editorial board of either the *Advocate* or *Crimson* he contributed a few articles to the latter. From one of these (April 7, 1876) relating to journalism and especially to certain objectionable writings in Boston papers about Harvard affairs, a few extracts may be quoted:

" . . . Judging from the nature of such articles and the manner in which they are presented to the public,—of course optional with the editors,—we see that those papers are the least inclined to be biassed that have connected with their editorial rooms college graduates. This point becomes more important when we remember that the number of college graduates who go into

journalism—meaning newspaper work—is doubling every year. There are, or have been, several undergraduates connected with Boston papers. There is no harm in that, so long as their efforts are confined to the delineation of absolute facts and their imaginations are not drawn on for the sake of another paragraph. But we may safely leave to their sense of honor not to willfully misrepresent. . . . It is very seldom indeed that an article appears in the *Advocate* or *Crimson* from which the public can get an erroneous impression of any phase of our college life. But when one does appear that admits of more than one rendering and allows the reader to draw his own inferences, it cannot fail to have considerable influence in the wrong direction. . . .”

Undoubtedly his wide acquaintance outside of College circles, incident to newspaper work, led to an opportunity to see something of the West while still in a partially wild state. Quoting again from our Third Report: “In the Sophomore year I went to the northern Indian Agencies as Secretary and Treasurer of the Commission appointed to investigate the charges preferred against Secretary Delano and the Indian Department by Professor O. C. Marsh of Yale.” Our classmate Harris was one of the party, his father being a member of the Commission. This was a remarkably interesting and unusual experience for a college student and fortunately Millet kept a journal during the trip, a copy of which will be deposited with our Class records in the Harvard Archives. A few extracts are here quoted. The great city of Omaha was, in 1875, a raw, straggling frontier town, “all hills, no straight streets, no gas at night and poor water.” The only decent buildings in town were the post office, hotel and high school. But it was evident that the place had a future.

On the seventh of August the party arrived at the Red Cloud Agency in Nebraska. “When I saw the

Agency buildings on the hill ahead and our coach just going up the hill I started the pony ahead lively, as I wanted to find out where we were to stop. Just as I went up the hill I saw Lo in all his glory for the first time. He came down the hill on his pony at a full gallop, lashing him at every step and yelling like mad. He was fully armed—so was I—gave me but one look and with a gruff 'How!' dashed by like a whirlwind. I shall never forget his red and green blanket and beaver hat, and shall know him if I see him again. . . . I put the pony in the corral and took a walk around the Agency, saying 'How' to every Indian I met . . . and was introduced to several big Chiefs. Old-Man-Afraid-of-his-Horses, Friday, interpreter for the Arapahoes, Red Leaf, Turkey Leg, Sitting Bull, Sword, and lots of others, all of whom said 'How' and shook hands heartily. . . . The men and women all wear heavy blankets even now. When on horse-back it's hard to tell a squaw from a brave. They all are painted in some way—either with red, yellow or green. Necklaces of pearl shells, loaded with bear claws, with earrings three inches in diameter, are worn by such men as Sitting Bull and Red Cloud and Sword. They all smoke the red pipes so rarely seen east and so often seen west. These pipes are made by the Indian alone, who goes three hundred miles after his stone—the only quarry in the United States. The dress of Lo is peculiar. Some wear hats and always with feathers. All wear blankets of some sort—the brighter the better. They all have a long strip of cloth hanging down behind and dragging on the ground. . . .

"I accepted an invitation from Sitting Bull to go with them to their tepees. . . . A ride of eight miles brought us to the village and we alighted at Sitting Bull's lodge. Mrs. Sitting Bull came out to hitch our ponies. . . . His sleeping lodge was one of the best I have seen. The tepee was made much like a tent with

a slant roof—material was duck. All around on the sides were hung his saddle, bridles, guns, trophies, war costume and fancy goods. On the left was a couch covered with buffalo skins. . . ”

August 17. “Bob and I experienced our first trouble with the Indians. We were riding along about a mile and a half away from the road. . . . I saw in the distance three horsemen coming towards us. They stopped and held a consultation, the result of which was a grand whooping, tearing rush for us. Bob’s horse went like the wind, way out of reach. . . . When they saw Bob out of reach they turned and put for me. . . . One came up on either side and another took my bridle. The man in front said ‘gimme pistol.’ . . . They were in doubt whether to rob me by force or not when the coach [which had been some distance behind] came up to the spot with a rush and they all ‘got’.”

After graduation Millet was employed in writing art criticisms and occasional editorials for the Boston *Daily Advertiser* and other papers. In October, 1879, an unfortunate accident (see Report VII, page 170) compelled a cessation of work for many months. From 1881 to 1886 he managed the art department of Houghton, Mifflin and Company, then became art editor of *Scribner’s Magazine*; and other art work kept him further occupied for many years. In 1891 the J. B. Millet Company was organized “for the purpose of publishing unusual and artistic literature.” Among the important publications of this Company were thirty-two volumes composing two notable works on the Orient: *Japan and China* and the *Oriental Series*. This enterprise led to four trips to Japan. He retired from the publishing business in 1915. Many details of this experience and of his art affiliations may be found in our various Class Reports.

Japan was one of his chief interests. He knew the country and the people, spoke Japanese and insisted

that no one ignorant of the language could understand the people, their psychology and political aspirations. He was convinced that the Japanese and their doings are altogether misunderstood by Occidentals. He had a personal and in some cases intimate acquaintance with many of the leading statesmen of Japan, especially of Japanese ambassadors to the United States. Several of them sent telegrams of condolence after his death. He also became associated as counsellor of the South Manchuria Railway Company. It may be supposed that the present (1938) activities of Japan in China and the dominance of militarism would have distressed him greatly, had he not been too ill to follow the course of events.

Very early Millet was able to foresee aviation as a practical accomplishment and in the nineties wrote on "Aeronautics" and on the "Problem of Flight in Free Air." "During this period," he writes in our Seventh Report (1917), "he was President of the Boston Aeronautical Society, formed in 1894, by Mr. James Means, for the purpose of studying flight and assisting in creating a 'heavier than air' machine. This was the first society formed for this purpose and included among its members all those in this country or abroad who were scientifically interested and dared to face the derisive criticisms of friends and acquaintances who quoted 'Darius Green'. This was nine years before the Wrights made their first flights. In 1907 he witnessed the first official flights made in France as the guest of Wilbur Wright, and on this occasion the latter expressed himself as more largely indebted to the assistance of the Boston Aeronautical Society than to any other source."

Perhaps Millet's greatest interest, dating from 1902, had its origin in experiments, suggested by Mr. Arthur J. Mundy, for signaling through water. The use of submerged bells as a means of warning ships of approach-

ing danger was made the subject of study, the methods gradually improved until a system was perfected which has been adopted by all maritime nations. Untold numbers of human lives and of ships have been saved by this method of signaling. Millet "soon became convinced that water as a means of conveying sound could be absolutely relied upon, whereas all scientists as well as navigators knew that the air was untrustworthy," because air varies in density, whereas the density of water is constant and it transmits sound with four times the speed of sound in air. It was "discovered that sound in water would easily pass through the walls of a vessel." Experiments in this field had been made from time to time for perhaps a century, but never before with practical results.

The Submarine Signal Company was organized, of which Millet became Vice-President and General Manager. Seven years were spent in developing the system, inventing apparatus, and in conducting a propaganda which resulted in "revolutionizing navigation." Difficulties and obstacles were one by one overcome. Experiments and tests were conducted leading to various inventions, some of which were made by Millet himself, including the most important of all —a device by which the direction of sound can be accurately ascertained. "I became convinced," he writes in a letter of March 25, 1935, "that the walls of a ship would collect enough sound below the water line, and that the walls of the ship itself would blanket the sound so that it would be heard with less distinctness on the side that was not presented towards the sound." The direction of the sound could be accurately determined by placing receiving apparatus on both sides of the ship. When the microphone used for this purpose was shown to Clarence John Blake, M.D. Harvard '65, distinguished aurist of Boston, he was struck with its close resemblance to the structure of the turtle's ear.

Much literature on this important subject has been published and the story is told with additional details in our Seventh Report. The patents on his inventions were given to the Company and he received no profit from them. To Mr. Mundy, who later became General Manager, full credit was given for his contributions to the subject.

Versatility marked Millet's career and his pursuits were multifarious. He had the artistic temperament of his distinguished brother, Francis Davis Millet, '69, who was lost on the *Titanic* in 1912. He traveled much and made the acquaintance of eminent people in various parts of the world. He was gregarious by nature, easily made friends, was fond of outdoor sports, and belonged to numerous clubs, social and athletic. His last years were passed in a state of invalidism mitigated and cheered by the ministrations of his wife.

During these later years F. W. Smith made occasional visits and contributes the following: "I regard Joe Millet as one of the unique members of our Class. And he was one of the most successful, really multi-successful—when we consider that the most genuine success consists in service to one's fellow-man rather than in financial returns to oneself. His genius, like his interest, was many-sided. Classmates who have followed his career are familiar with his notable achievements which have done signal honor to him, his family, his Class and his country.

"I had seen little of Joe since graduation. So in my brief visits in recent years it has given me a kind of Keatsian delight in discovering the real Joe Millet and learning of his exploits. He not only won distinction in literature and art but did notable work in the application of science to the betterment of life. The sea will always be safer because one of his inventions makes it easy for ships to sense impending danger and the device was quickly adopted by the shipping of all nations.

His practical interest in and knowledge of the new science of aeronautics doubtless helped to speed the development of new modes and lanes of travel and transportation that go far toward eliminating time and space in moving about this little globe.

“It is a delight to recall his keen interest and alert mind that refused to succumb to severe infirmities of age that overtook him. He delighted to direct the attention of his callers to a section of his spacious room literally covered with tokens of friendship and esteem of distinguished citizens of other countries won in his overseas quests of literature, art and history.

“These few notes will serve to illustrate the breadth of his genius and the quality of his work and the wide favor he won in his own country and abroad. Memories of my visits with him will always remain charged with vivid pictures of a man who entered into the life of his times in remarkable fashion. He wrought well and beneficially. His work will endure—a contribution to his times that anyone might envy.”

A close friend through life was Lamson, who writes: “Jo Millet I always knew from the first of our college days and ever since, closely, constantly and always most happily. He was a highly gifted man, a truly devoted friend, and filled with his full share of the best Yankee keenness and humor. A fine tonic for himself and for those around him.”

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of Millet’s joining the famous Tavern Club, of Boston, he was given a medal and William Roscoe Thayer, ’81, read the following verses:

The earliest Joe—alas, the shame of it!
Unpitying brothers pitted in a pit.
But tho’ one tried, there’s not a living soul
Able to put our Brother in a hole;

And none could wish such ruthlessness to show
To our true-hearted, witty, genial Joe.
Perhaps if Jacob's son *Josiah* had been,
Instead of *Joseph*, kinder were his kin.

Think of Joe's score! From Boston to Japan,
His wit the white, the black, the yellow man—
And red men, too, if any happened near—
Have heard and laughed, and asked again to hear.
And e'en John Bull, tho' slow to see a joke,
Learned to guffaw before Joe Millet spoke,—
A safe precaution, lest his nimble mind
Should leave the dull a tale or two behind.

But Joe's no trifler—that's his simple way
For bringing serious business into play;
Lured by his frankness, by his humor charmed,
The stranger greets him, all distrust disarmed—
Hears him dilate upon the arts and lore
Of making books, or Nippon's wealth explore,
Or modestly describe the wondrous bell
That warns off ships from reefs or Prussian hell.

But Taverners need not to hear me tell
The other gifts that make us love him well;
So, Holker, bind the silvery, silken fillet—
Medal, I mean—on Brother J. B. Millet.







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